

How Female University Students in Kazakhstan Express Their Feminist Identity in Different Social Contexts: A Qualitative Study Based on Students at Nazarbayev University

Abstract

This research project examines the experiences which young women who study at Nazarbayev University (NU) and identify themselves as feminists encountered in different social contexts in Kazakhstan (unfamiliar/familial/university contexts), what they link their experiences to and what specific situations they have been in because of their feminist identity expression. Comparison of the experiences of female university students in familiar and new and unfamiliar social contexts provides insights into the ways in which feminist identity is negotiated and adapted in different settings, how and under which circumstances feminist identity of Kazakhstani women is revealed and concealed. To understand more about feminist identities in various social contexts the Identity Salience Theory will be applied to explain some of the processes related to revealing/concealing feminist identity.

Key words: feminism, feminists, feminist identity, Kazakhstan, identity salience theory

Section 1: Introduction

Feminism is an important thing to many women around the world. It allows women to fight for their rights and see their self-worth in something other than traditional gender roles. Feminism has an influence on the way some individuals behave, what they believe in and what they try to promote in a society, and it has an impact on the identities of those people, who consider themselves supporters of feminism. Feminists also have diverse experiences when it comes to expressing their feminist identity. Their experiences might differ due to a social context they are in, and it can be influenced by other factors as well. One of such enormous factors is sex and gender identity of a person, which can and will alter the experiences with feminist identity expression because of socially constructed differences. This is also the main reason why this study focuses exclusively on female feminists - feminist experiences of women differ from men dramatically. The topic this research project was interested in is what exactly the experiences of feminists are when it comes to expressing their feminist identity in various social contexts.

That is why this research paper explores the topic of feminist identity expression by applying it to young women in Kazakhstan taking into consideration 3 social contexts - Nazarbayev University (NU), home (including both nuclear and extended family), and generally new and unfamiliar social contexts. There are specific reasons why the 3 social contexts chosen are university (NU), family, and strangers. Universities are often seen as sites of socialization and identity formation for students (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004), and they provide a unique environment for exploring how students develop and express their beliefs and values. In the case of feminist identity, universities may be particularly important because they offer opportunities for engagement with feminist ideas, activism, and student organizations. Home and family as social contexts are also important for identity development, especially in such a culture like Kazakhstan where family ties are highly valued (Ilimkhanova et al., 2014). Studying how female university students express their feminist identity in these contexts will shed light on the ways in which family dynamics and cultural expectations intersect with feminist identities. Finally, including new and unfamiliar social contexts in the study could help to identify the ways in which context specific norms and values shape the expression of feminist identity. By comparing the experiences of female university students in familiar and new and unfamiliar social contexts could provide insights into the ways in which feminist identity is negotiated and adapted in different settings.

This project will examine the experiences which young women who study at Nazarbayev University (NU) and identify themselves as feminists encountered in different social contexts in Kazakhstan, what they link their experiences to and what specific situations they have been in because of their feminist identities. To understand more about feminist identities in various social contexts the Identity Salience Theory will be applied to explain some of the processes related to revealing/concealing feminist identity.

Section 2: Literature Review

When it comes to research on feminism in social sciences, there are many works that cover numerous different topics with regards to feminism and feminist identity. Some of such topics are related to psychology, professional occupation, intersectionality, gender-based violence, sexism, and women's responses to it, to name a few.

In terms of Kazakhstani research and other works on feminism, a big interest around the topic can be seen in the last decade or so. Particularly, there has been research on various topics in Kazakhstan:

- perspectives on social protection and employment (Khamzina et al, 2020),
- on social perception of women's bodies and related problems (Nikulina, 2017),
- on present implications and further perspectives of feminism (Seydakhmetova, 2018),

- on intersectionality and local situation with feminism (Udod, 2018),
- on gender related frameworks in Kazakhstan (there is a focus on different Eurasian countries) (Tlostanova, 2010)
- on gender studies in Kazakhstan (Shakirova, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are still a lot of topics yet to be researched within Kazakhstan's borders. I have not found any scientific works related specifically to the feminist identity expression of Kazakhstani women. There is a gap in the area of feminist identity expression when it comes to Kazakhstan. That is why it is important to explore this topic within Kazakhstan.

It is also important to look into feminist identity expression overall, not only in Kazakhstan. There are many works related to feminist identities and behavior in the international arena. There have been works about how female students develop a feminist identity (Zheng, 2017), how feminist identity can affect women's responses to sexist behavior (Leaper & Arias, 2011), whether or not feminist identity affects career paths pursued by women (Lee & Wessel, 2022), what can be considered as the modern feminist identity (Siegel, 2021), and many other works. However, they are not related to the expression of feminist identity directly. Many works surely explore its aspects, its influence on different spheres in women's lives, but not the expression of it in different social contexts.

Admittedly, there are a couple of works that look into a similar topic. For instance, there is a study which concluded that some people, who do not identify as supporters of feminism, in the environment which supports feminism can sometimes engage in implicitly feminist practices - or, in other words, behavior that is not directly connected as feminist but falls in line with feminist beliefs (Pardo, 1995). The same way people, who identify themselves as supporters of feminism, can sometimes have controversial opinions or engage in sexist or misogynistic behaviors. Moreover, there is a less outdated study that explored how self-identified feminists engage in implicitly feminist practices. In this study there was also an interesting conclusion that in a social context that supports feminism it was easier for girls to 'do' feminism, and it was harder when they were in contexts that did not support or approve of feminism (Giffort, 2010). The study was conducted in a camp for girls that aimed at empowering girls through rock music, but it did not identify as a camp for feminists. This camp was a perfect example of how people can feel safer when showing behavior that might be associated with feminism - some participants found it easier to do it among other girls and women rather than in a society where they might be judged for such views or behavior, for example, at school and with other peers. This discussion about how various social contexts can affect girls' expression of feminist identity is close to this research project. This is the closest literature that was found and was related to feminist identity expression in various social contexts. However, when it comes to literature on feminist identity expression specifically in different social contexts - there is very little information as to how it happens, why and what might affect it. This shows that there is a lack of literature on the topic.

Therefore, as can be seen, there is a gap in literature and works related to the feminist identity expression in different social contexts. So, this research will allow us to understand more about the way female students in Kazakhstan choose to express or not to express their feminist identity within certain social contexts. This research will fill in the gap in the works on feminist identity expression not only for Kazakhstan, but generally, too.

To analyze feminist identity expression in various social contexts, Identity Salience Theory and related aspects will be used. To look into feminist identity expression in different social contexts it is possible to begin by looking at the link between identity and behavior, firstly. Burke and Reitzes (1981) discovered in their study that there is a link between a person's identity and behaviors they choose to participate in. Put in simple words, if a person identifies themselves as someone, they will engage in activities associated with this identity.

Furthermore, Identity Salience Theory (Stryker & Serpe, 1982) states that a person's identity is made up of different identities. People respond to certain social situations or contexts by activating a relevant identity. For example, I work as an English teacher. If a student addresses me with a question about English grammar, I will activate my teacher's identity and engage in behavior associated with it - teaching English grammar. There are many identities in one person, and such identities can also be put into a salience hierarchy. The order in a salience hierarchy is defined by how likely it is that a certain identity will be activated or highlighted over another identity in a specific social context. To elaborate, 2 different identities can be activated at the same time, but one of them can have a more significant impact on the behavior of a person. This more 'agent' identity is the salient one - an identity with the most influential and frequent effect on responses to different social contexts is considered to be a salient identity. When a person uses a certain identity in various social contexts and shows it to more people, commitment to an identity is higher. The Identity Salience Theory will help this research in understanding to what extent feminists at NU are committed to their feminist identity and what affected their identity expression choices in various social contexts.

With regards to social contexts and Identity Salience Theory, there is an interesting and relevant study that examined identity by looking at how different settings in social contexts affected activation and expression of a specific identity (Carter, 2013). The findings of this study suggest that people's activated identity influenced their behavior when they were by themselves, in a group, and in a group that pressured them to behave against their identity. Moreover, activated identities have a more significant role in influencing a person's behavior. The findings suggest that once an identity is activated, the behavior stays consistent in various social contexts. This is a very interesting and intriguing perspective for my research as well, because even if it was not about feminist identity, it showed that different social contexts do affect the changes in behavior and how identities are activated or suppressed.

When it comes to data analysis and interpretation, qualitative coding will be used to interpret the data, and Grounded Theory will be used for this research project. Grounded Theory

is one of the most popular approaches in qualitative research. Grounded Theory is a qualitative research method of discovering a new theory from the data that was collected. So, the theory is grounded in the acquired data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was decided to use Grounded Theory because it can be extremely useful in uncovering social behaviors and because this is the most suitable method with regards to the purpose and sample of this research.

Section 3: Methodology

Convenience sampling was employed in the study because of geographical proximity, the ease of access to the pool of participants and established ways of communication with the participants. The sample is based on the students of Nazarbayev University only. This is mainly because, out of all universities in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev University's community is perceived to be more liberal. For instance, this is the 1st university in Kazakhstan to host 2 feminist marches on campus to support women's rights and familiarize the university community with some form of feminist agenda. Such liberal context may contribute to a safe environment for feminists to be more open about their personal beliefs / views and self-identification as feminists. This helped to have easier access to a sample that is necessary for this research project - female feminist students. Students of any programs (foundation year, undergraduate and graduate programs) were accepted as participants. However, the participants of this study are undergraduate students only since the women who expressed a desire to participate were only undergraduate students. Participants for the research were selected based on the following criteria: (1) female, (2) over the age of 18, (3) identifies as a feminist. Sample size: 13 participants.

Participants were recruited from the programs at Nazarbayev University, so NU-specific tools were used to reach potential participants. Firstly, free tools were used to reach the necessary audience: online student communities on social networking platforms. The interviewees were recruited in NU communities in Telegram (course chats and interest groups). During the recruitment process, the participants needed to provide the information about their age, major, preferred language, and mode of the interview (online or offline). Oral consent was obtained before the beginning of each of the interviews. Some demographic information of the participants was gathered: age, major and school at the university, home city, family background, preferred language, as well as a preferred pseudonym and indication of interest (or lack of) in receiving a copy of the results. Supplementary materials for the interviews include interview questions and consent forms, and they can be found in the Appendix. The interviews were recorded and conducted according to the preferences of the participants - in Russian and English, online and offline using places and platforms available without any fees. The interviews also did not require any material props or set-ups. In total, there were 3 online interviews and 10 offline interviews. All names used in this research paper are pseudonyms.

The researcher is a female student identifying as a feminist, which not only did not limit access to the sample but also made it easier to connect with the participants. It was easier to provide emotional support and compassion for the research participants during interviews when they experienced emotional unease. The researcher was also aware of personal biases that might have gotten in the way of executing the research or analyzing acquired data and did everything possible to avoid allowing those biases to interfere with the research, including not sharing personal opinion and not showing signs of disagreement with the responses during the interviews, and critically assessing the personal approach to analysis of the data.

After the data collection stage, the data gathered via interviews has been transcribed. Data analysis was conducted using open, axial, and selective coding, and thematic analysis. Firstly, all codes that surfaced in the interviews have been identified. Next, connections between the codes have been established. Then, using selective coding, the central categories or general themes have been identified and described. In addition, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data sets, pre-establish patterns and major themes that came up during the interviews. To report the findings, it was decided to use Grounded Theory because it can be extremely useful in uncovering social behaviors and because this is the most suitable method with regards to the purpose and sample of this research.

Section 4: Findings

*This is not a quantitative study, although it is important to provide a full picture of the qualitative data without overgeneralizing or not generalizing enough. Thus, the following sections include specific numbers of participants, and there are tables with specific categories of participants' responses in numbers.

Participants' Experiences Related to Feminism

Feminism's Influence

As was stated in the beginning, feminism is an important thing to many women. This was especially evident from the results of this study - every one of the participants (13) expressed that feminism has influenced their lives significantly and now plays an important role in their lives. During the interviews many women stated that feminism has helped them to understand their place in the world, their self-worth, and the fact that they should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Some even expressed that feminism has become their moral and social compass with the help of which they decide what people they want to see around - friends/relatives/romantic partners, what companies they want to work in, which path to choose - career/family/both, and the same is applicable to the other spheres of life.

Becoming a Feminist

The majority of participants (8) became feminists in their teenage years - at 14 to 17, a minor part (3) came to adopt feminism fairly recently - 1 year ago or less, and some (2) said that they always knew that they were feminists but did not realize it until such terms as “feminism” and “feminist” were popularized in Kazakhstan. The factors which influenced this varied. Almost all women (10 out of 13 participants) said that they became feminists because they witnessed unfair treatment and discrimination or violence on the basis of gender, and this pushing factor made them seek some support network or a way to improve the state of things for themselves and other women. Some also voiced such other factors as access to the Internet - specifically, to feminist communities on different social media platforms (5); better education which they or their parents/friends/siblings received (6); and their family’s level of income (6). Among other factors was having strong role models or upbringing (5) that inspired them to have more opportunities, pursue education and challenge existing social expectations for women, which also made them find like-minded women in feminism.

Being a Feminist

There were some feminists who identified themselves as radical (5), some who did not want to label themselves (4) and others who supported intersectional (2) and liberal (2) feminism. With regards to practicing feminism, all participants (13) shared that they consume social media content related to feminism online on Instagram, TikTok, VKontakte, Telegram, with 4 participants only consuming content related to Kazakhstani feminism. All participants also practice feminism through their lifestyle - their choices and beliefs. Almost a half of all participants (6) are also activists who advocate for women’s rights by participating in feminist events and organizations, practice informational activism and creation and maintaining of safe spaces and opportunities for women in various spheres.

It is also important to note that the participants of this study were mostly from the department of sciences and humanities (Figure 4). It is true that there are less women in technical departments and professions, and they still have extremely different experiences. Such experiences are represented only by 1 woman in this study.

Feminist Identity Expression in 3 Social Contexts

As was mentioned previously, according to the Identity Salience Theory, people’s identities are made up of smaller parts, and each person has several identities. A person’s identities can vary and have a hierarchical order, which affects how a person will respond to a certain social situation. If an identity is persistent in numerous social contexts, that identity is generally salient. Alternatively, an identity can be salient within a singular social context, having a more significant impact on the behavior of a person. To understand feminist identities of

women in Kazakhstan, various circumstances under which women conceal or reveal their feminist identities will be examined here. 3 social contexts have been selected to look at the feminist identity expression: new and unfamiliar, familial, and university (NU) social context.

Generally, women choose to conceal or reveal their feminist identity for several reasons. Women brought up these reasons to conceal feminist identity: anti-feminist views of an interlocutor/s (9), potential for reprimand or judgment (7), potential for physical threat (6), potential for emotional distress (6), being around men/religious/old people (6), and lacking confidence about their feminist identity in the beginning (5). On the other hand, women reported that they always reveal their feminist identity to help women/girls - this includes support/encouragement/protection (9), when they meet like-minded people (7), and because they think that it is important to discuss this topic to challenge/educate other people and share their own perspectives (7). Also, feminists felt safer revealing their identity to women rather than men in all social contexts - to women whom they do not know very well, to family members who are women, and to professors and peers who are also women. This is because feminists have experienced that men are generally more negative towards expressions of feminist identity, while women can share similar experiences and identities to them or can be more open to accepting that they might have a different position.

Both categories of feminists, those who reveal and conceal their feminist identity, talked about the fact that there is a very strong stigmatization and misconception of feminism and feminists. Many people still believe that feminists are just women who hate men and want to establish matriarchy, and that feminism has a negative influence on women and society. People also think that feminism is not necessary, that women already have enough rights, and that it is unreasonable for women to want to have more rights. More than that, radical feminists face even more resistance and judgment being stigmatized as crazy, men-hating, ugly, and so on. As well as that, there is a lot of misunderstanding around feminism. The participants suggested that all of this may be the case because of the lack of informational content easily available to all people, lack of good education, culture, upbringing, strong influence of patriarchal society, and ignorance.

Because of the misconception of feminism in society, women often choose to strategically conceal their identity until they feel comfortable with revealing it, or they disguise their feminist identity to make it look less threatening to others. Some women expressed that they try to avoid using the words “feminism” and “feminist”, and sometimes completely leave this part of their identity out only explaining what they believe in and what they do, or disguise it as something more ‘appropriate’ in Kazakhstani society by saying that they are “supporting human rights”, “defending women”, “creating/participating in initiatives for women”, etc. This happens mostly in new or unfamiliar social situations and a few times at the university when feminists still do not know a person well, so they try to understand during initial interactions/days will that person be able to accept their feminist identity or not. Interestingly, almost a half of all participants (6) admitted to disguising their feminist identity with new people

which they have had romantic interest in (unfamiliar/NU social context) and to family members. To illustrate, one of the participants, Aray, talked about how there was temptation to conceal her feminist identity because she was attracted to a person, and she said:

“The only time when I felt that I needed to conceal [my feminist identity] is when I was just becoming a feminist, it was when I liked someone a lot, and that person had a marked anti-feminist position, you make a choice to stay a feminist or to conceal it”¹.

Talking about disguising feminism in the family, one participant, Zhansaya, said:

“I do not use the word ‘feminism’, but yes, we do talk about development, development of women ...my dad, for example, perhaps will not understand these words (feminism)”².

When it comes to hiding or disguising feminist identity with new people, feminists have said that they do not want to get hurt so they wait until another person shows that they do not hold anti-feminist beliefs and that they will not change their attitude towards them. If this is the case and another person does not appear to be able to accept their feminist identity, feminists say that they make a choice between staying a feminist and hiding their identity to stay more ‘attractive’. For example, one participant, Zhanna, said:

“I had a profile on a dating app, which said that I am pro human rights, but women’s rights also count as human rights, so I can say [that I am a feminist] somehow vaguely ... and in a couple of days I can say [that I am a feminist] if I see that a person is sensible”³.

A few feminists also said that they do it at home as well. At home it may happen because parents may not necessarily understand what feminism is, but they might have a clearer idea if a feminist explains what she does and believes in and how this helps women without referring to it as feminism. For example, one participant shared that she rarely calls herself a feminist but that she believes that everything she does shows that she is a feminist. Again, because of an extremely influential stigma in Kazakhstani society, it is hard to reveal feminist identity. Some explanations were also voiced: some women do this because not everyone might have the same background they do and other people might not be able to fully understand what feminism is because of the stigma in society, this was also partially related to having higher education - many women believed that having a higher education influences will a person understand/accept feminist positions; some believe that another person will be more likely to react less aggressively

¹ “единственный раз когда я чувствовала, что мне нужно было это скрыть был когда я только становилась феминисткой, что вот когда мне кто-то очень нравится, а у этого человека ярая антифем позиция, ты делаешь выбор мне оставаться феминисткой или скрывать это”.

² “я не использую слово феминизм, но да, дома мы говорим про развитие, про развитие девушек. ... папа, например, он, наверное, не поймёт эти слова”

³ “у меня, например, было в анкете в приложении для знакомств, что я за права человека, но это в том числе и за права женщин считается, то есть я могу как-то более обтекаемо сказать это ... я в течение пары дней могу это рассказать, если я увижу, что в целом человек адекватный”.

and be more likely to accept their position if another person will hear that a feminist is for equal rights and not for patriarchy.

Overall, it is evident that women view new and unfamiliar social contexts (strangers and relatively unfamiliar people) as the least safe to reveal their feminist identity. The safest social environment is university (NU), and familial social context is more likely to be seen as safe rather than unsafe (Figure 1). This happens due to a variety of reasons which will be discussed later on.

1. new and unfamiliar Social Contexts (Strangers and Relatively Unfamiliar People)

To begin with, the majority of participants (8) have shared that they usually reveal their feminist identity when asked by unfamiliar or relatively unfamiliar people (Figure 2). Even though it is evident that many women bring their feminist identity to the forefront, the participants still shared that they usually have concerns about their safety and comfort, and that they usually receive negative reactions from people in new or unfamiliar social contexts. Consequently, women try to stop a conversation with people who have negative attitudes towards feminism. Additionally, only 1 woman out of 13 said that she would feel completely safe revealing her feminist identity to strangers or relatively familiar people and that she has not ever encountered any markedly negative reactions.

Many participants also shared that they feel much more comfortable sharing their feminist identity with a woman regardless of her opinion than with a man because women do not react as aggressively as men and just say that they would like to agree to disagree. One participant, Aray, said this about aggressive reactions:

“Most of the time it is coming from men, it does not happen from women. It happens rarely, ... if I tell women [I am a feminist], they will likely say ‘same’ ... but even if they do not understand [feminism], they do not react as strongly, they might just say ‘ok that is your opinion’ ”⁴.

There were also those feminists who did not feel comfortable enough to share their feminist identity with strangers or relatively unfamiliar people. Those who choose to conceal their feminist identity expressed that they fear revealing their feminist identity in new or unfamiliar social situations in Kazakhstan because of the potential harm they could receive. One participant, Eva, said:

⁴ “чаще всего это мужчины, с женщинами такого не бывает. Бывает очень редко, ... если я говорю девушкам [что я феминистка], скорее всего девушки скажут, что я тоже ... но даже если они не понимают [феминизм], они так особо не реагируют, просто ‘хорошо это твое мнение’ ”

*“Now in Kazakhstan I would still actually be afraid to tell people that I am a feminist. I do not know how a person, whom I do not know, can react to it, maybe he will just taunt me, but maybe it can end up being something more aggressive...”*⁵.

Similarly, some others also said that they do not feel comfortable revealing their feminist identity because they do not know how a person might react - this person might taunt or do something worse like verbally harass or physically attack a woman, and that they can never know what a person is capable of and so *“it is better to keep quiet about your position”*⁶. Some women have said that they generally do not want to engage in conflicts and that they abstain from revealing their feminist identity if they understand or sense that a person has opposing views. And on the contrary, there were a few women who said that they feel less pressure revealing their feminist identity than with their family, for example, because there are less expectations and they will not care what another person thinks about them in the future.

The most popular reason to name new and unfamiliar social contexts as the least safe was that people usually do not understand or have a misconception of what feminism is, with almost all participants (12) having faced such encounters (Figure 3). The next equally popular reasons were that people frequently argue or try to prove that feminism is not needed anymore, and that people can be aggressive towards women expressing feminist identities. 9 out of 13 participants reported having met such reactions. And the last reason which came up was that some feminists (5) have met people who taunted them and laughed at their feminist values.

2. Familial Social Context (Nuclear and Extended Family)

Moving on to familial social context, the same number of women (8) said that they choose to reveal their feminist identity to their nuclear and extended family in conversations and interactions with family members (Figure 2). Slightly less than a half of those women (3) felt comfortable with discussing feminism and revealing their feminist identity, the other part (5) did it to challenge their family members' sexist views and remarks. More feminists feel comfortable revealing their identity to their nuclear family rather than extended.

Even though most of the women reveal their identity, almost all of them shared that they receive negative reactions of some kind from family members (Figure 3). Almost all women (11) said that their family members often do not understand or misunderstand what feminism is, and that sometimes (6) family members argue with the feminists that feminism is harmful/wrong/unnecessary/just a phase, they try to discredit the feminists when they reveal their feminist identity. Most feminists have said that this is because of contradicting views, but some said that their family members are worried about them and their future, as those family members

⁵ *“сейчас в Казахстане на самом деле до сих пор мне было бы страшно рассказать о том, что я феминистка. Я не знаю, как человек, незнакомый мне, может отреагировать на это, может быть он просто от меня обсмеет, а может быть это может даже закончиться чем-то более агрессивным”*

⁶ *“лучше не говорить про свою позицию лишний раз” - Liya*

realize that feminism is still not accepted in Kazakhstani society. One participant has shared her thought about the fact that family members are concerned about her being a feminist:

“[They experience] unrest because they understand that any expression of your positions is not exactly desired, especially political since it is dangerous”⁷.

And fewer times they witness taunting of their feminist identity expression, this usually happens from family members of closer ages - siblings, cousins, etc. With regards to aggression, only 2 women shared having met such a reaction in the familial social context. Such reactions contribute to the feminists’ desire to reveal their identity - most of the women said that they do not want to reveal their feminist identity because of such reactions, but most of them still do regardless of family members’ reactions. And it is often the case that a feminist reveals her feminist identity to members of the family who share the same views or support them - like-minded siblings or cousins, supporting mothers or aunts, etc; and usually feminists reveal their feminist identity mostly to younger family members and to women.

There are also feminists (5) who decide not to reveal their feminist identity in the context of family (Figure 2). This usually happens because they simply do not discuss such topics or do not have a close relationship with their family members and relatives, because of family dynamics. Feminists may choose to conceal their feminist identity in the context of family to avoid emotional unease, negativity, and conflicts. Among the feminists who decide to conceal their feminist identity and view familial social context as the least safe, some say that this is because they need to interact with them almost every day when they live together and contact them often when they are not living in one household. For example, Karlygash, one of the participants who chose family as the least safe context, said:

“[This is] not necessarily because they will say or do something horrible just because of family, there's lots of emotional investment”.

Therefore, to maintain a relationship with family members, some feminists may choose to conceal their feminist identity, or to disguise it. Also, such feminists who choose not to reveal their feminist identity in familial social context say that it does not mean that they believe or confide in their feminist identity less, they just lower the extent to which they express it at home or with relatives. Moreover, a few people said that they still fulfill traditional gender roles because they cannot reveal their feminist identity, even if they believe that it is not right. One of the participants talked about this and said:

⁷ “волнение, потому что они понимали что-либо проявление своей позиции в принципе не желают, особенно политической, это опасно”

“I would not say that it makes me believe in feminist values less. Well, it does make me express them less in the home environment. ... I still do such things, I mean I take care of my close ones, bring them tea, lay the table, clean everything up”⁸.

There is some compromise between being a feminist and a good daughter, for example.

In the context of Kazakhstan, many participants attributed this to culture and traditions because Kazakh people have a belief that younger generations should respect older people, and this often means not being able to talk back or say something in return, which would be considered signs of disrespect. In some cases, feminist identity expressions may be seen as threatening or disrespectful to traditional family values within Kazakhstani culture.

3. University Social Context (Students, Professors, Classroom Environment)

Discussion of this context with the participants was extremely different from 2 previous contexts. Almost all feminists (12) shared that they reveal their feminist identity at the university (NU) when asked or when there is an opportunity to join a discussion about feminism (Figure 2). All feminists felt more comfortable revealing their feminist identity at NU rather than in the contexts of family and strangers. A majority of all participants (7) named this social context as the safest one to reveal their feminist identity, and none of the feminists chose this context as the least safe (Figure 1).

Feminists also shared that they have faced substantially fewer negative reactions with only 2 feminists having met markedly anti-feminist positions and arguments, 2 having faced misunderstanding, and only 1 feminist feeling slightly uncomfortable and cautious when revealing her feminist identity because of past experiences. There have been 0 reports of aggressive reactions and taunting to the feminist identity expression. On the contrary, almost all feminists (12) said that usually when they reveal their feminist identity they see understanding or tolerance from others. The same number of the participants said that they feel safe discussing feminism and revealing their feminist identity in class discussions. Interestingly, in comparison to unfamiliar and familial social contexts, more women said that it is important to discuss such matters as women’s rights and feminism (one participant put it this way: *“I think it is important to voice such thoughts that go against these stereotypical ideas [about women and feminists]”⁹*), and that the university environment is safe enough to do that (as per a participants’ words: *“I like NU as a small block where it is not shameful to talk [about feminism]”¹⁰*). Moreover, many

⁸ *“я бы не сказала, что это заставляет меня меньше верить в феминистские ценности. ну, это заставляет меня меньше их проявлять в домашней обстановке. ... я все также веду, ну то есть ухаживаю за родными там, чай накрыть, стол поставить, полностью все прибрать”.*

⁹ *мне кажется важно озвучивать мысли, которые идут против вот этих стереотипных идей [о женщинах и феминистках]”*

¹⁰ *“мне нравится НУ как небольшой блок, где о [феминизме] не стыдно поговорить”*

feminists shared that they are encouraged to share their opinion on feminism in certain classes. One such participant shared that most of the courses are thought-provoking, she said:

“I'd say NU [is the safest social context]. And that's because I think here we are encouraged to share everything, at least in the classroom”.

Almost all feminists said that they view NU as a safe space to reveal their feminist identity without feeling shamed, judged, or ridiculed. They connected it with the fact that people have more knowledge about feminism and, therefore, can accept someone's feminist identity. Also, there was a connection with higher education in English, where the language served as the medium between the available information on feminism and the students/professors. Some feminists said that even if a person does not support feminism, they have an idea of what it is and have the resources to find out more. One of the participants said:

“I believe that the views at NU are more progressive and most of the people, even if they do not fully understand feminism, have some kind of understanding”¹¹.

Although women generally feel safer revealing their identity at the university, there are some circumstances which may make them want to conceal their identity. It is important to note that even though the context of university can be generally safer, there is still a huge influence of culture and societal norms of Kazakhstan. A few women shared that they have encountered people with very negative attitudes towards feminism and feminists. Furthermore, some feminists said that they feel more comfortable revealing their feminist identity because the department they are in consists mostly of women, and that they are still cautious when it comes to revealing their identity to their male peers. This is what one of the participants said:

“There are sociology majors, and we have 99% girls there, and it is possible [to reveal feminist identity]”¹².

As well as that, almost all participants said that professors are gentle with any views and effectively guide class discussions. There is a possibility that the context of university is a safer space to reveal feminist identity because of the regulations it has - the student code of non-academic conduct, for example, and because students have a greater access to information about feminism in class and informational resources.

On the other hand, there is still a possibility to encounter negative attitudes towards feminism. There were 12 participants from the school of sciences and humanities of Nazarbayev University, and only 1 participant from the school of engineering and digital sciences - Dana (Figure 4). The experiences of that 1 participant have differed extremely. She shared that she

¹¹ “Мне кажется все-таки что в НУ взгляды более прогрессивные и у большинства людей, даже если они не полностью понимают феминизм, какое-то понятие есть”.

¹² “есть социологи, там у нас 99% девочки, ещё более менее можно [поделиться своей феминистской личностью]”

does not feel comfortable revealing her feminist identity to classmates because most of them are men, hold patriarchal views and disapprove of feminism and feminists. She shared that now she does not reveal her feminist identity at the university because of negative experiences in the past when her classmates were dismissive, argued with her and judged her because of the fact that she is a radical feminist. She also said that one of the factors why this happens is that there are no opportunities to discuss such topics as feminism in classrooms. Dana said:

“We kind of do not have such topics [as feminism] brought up, well often at least my classmates from physics major, for example, we do not usually discuss this with them”¹³.

Technical majors have less opportunities to get familiar with the concept of feminism because they simply do not have social sciences courses which might include topics related to gender equality and feminism. Moreover, there are less women/feminists who could potentially call out technical major students’ discriminating beliefs, challenge gender stereotypes or advocate for women’s rights.

Section 5: Discussion

Based on the findings, feminists may reveal or conceal their feminist identity depending on various factors and in different social contexts. Out of the 3 social contexts (unfamiliar, familial, and NU), the participants (7) felt that NU is the safest context to reveal their feminist identity (Figure 1). This was justified by a more liberal campus culture, safe learning environment, and less fear of physical violence threats or emotional distress. The next was familial context (5), and new and unfamiliar context (1). On the other hand, new and unfamiliar social context in Kazakhstan was the least safe context according to the participants (10). This is because there is a greater possibility to face marked anti-feminist positions, physical and verbal aggression, and misunderstanding. Familial social context was the second least safe (3), and the reasons for this were close to the ones mentioned for new and unfamiliar social contexts but to the lesser extent. None of the participants found the context of university unsafe.

Previous research has shown that women are prone to engage in feminist practices when they are in an environment which supports and encourages feminists, and which consists of women (Pardo, 1995). This is reinforced by the findings of the study because most of the participants shared that they felt much more comfortable revealing their feminist identity in social contexts consisting of women and environments which support feminism’s views. And on the contrary, women tend to hide or disguise their feminist identity when judged, reprimanded or feel aggression and unacceptance of feminist identity expression.

¹³ “у нас как-то эти темы они не поднимаются, прям вот часто по крайней мере мои одногруппники именно физики, например, мы с ним обычно об этом не говорим”.

The potential circumstances which could make feminists want to conceal their feminist identity were marked anti-feminist positions, potential reprimand, potential threats of physical violence, as well as emotional distress. Some participants also voiced that they try to conceal their feminist identity when they are around males, older people or are in religious contexts (Figure 5). And there also were feminists who said that there are no such circumstances which would make them want to conceal their feminist identity (2). A lot of the participants also believe that there is an extremely strong stigma surrounding feminism and groups of feminists (especially radical feminists). And, they said that this stigmatization makes it overly difficult to want to reveal their feminist identity overall. On the contrary, the participants said that they would feel obliged to reveal their feminist identity when they see other women/girls being discriminated against and deprived of opportunities based on their gender. The participants shared that they would feel a strong need to reveal their feminist identity if there were harmful behaviors/sayings which they could condemn and stop. Likewise, they would want to reveal their feminist identity at times when it is important to discuss such topics, and with like-minded people (Figure 5).

Overall, the study shows that feminist identities of young women in Kazakhstan are not static - the participants shared that at some point in their lives they altered and modified their feminist values and self-identification. Also, feminist identity is not static because women constantly choose to hide, show, or disguise it based on the response they anticipate and the social context they are in. Moreover, feminist identities of Kazakhstani women are not generally salient because of the stigmatization and nonacceptance of feminism in the society, the feminist identity is compromising with other identities, for example, daughter, Kazakh woman, girlfriend, and so on.

Through understanding of how feminist identity is expressed and met in Kazakhstan, it is possible to gain insights into how the society is in general and how complex social patterns influence and shape expression of feminist identity. This understanding can assist in promotion of a more inclusive and less discriminating social context in which feminists will feel safer and more supported. As a result of this study, it is evident that education and access to information play a vital role in a society's acceptance of feminism and feminists.

Limitations

Although this research indicates that feminist identity is initially salient but not generally salient in Kazakhstani women, this study overlooks which identities are salient in the context of the country. So, it is important to note that this study only considers the circumstances and factors which affect feminist identity - how it is revealed and concealed, adapted and negotiated, and it does not look at which identities were salient. This might be one of the directions for future research.

Additionally, during the interviews there were a few mentions of online contexts for feminist identity expression. It was noted that people on social media also perceive feminism negatively, and it was also said that online spaces are unsafe for women and are viewed by them as equally unsafe as unfamiliar or new social contexts. Although this is an interesting insight, this study overlooks online spaces such as social networking sites and social media. This is another one of the limitations of this study, it only looks at physical spaces and in-person interactions. Closing this gap in knowledge about online spaces is also a perfect opportunity for future research. This can be another direction for future research because there may be a difference between offline social identities and online identities such as feminist identity.

With regards to other limitations, this study may disproportionately represent radical feminists (over other groups of feminists based on the self-identification of the participants) and women in social sciences and humanities (as opposed to digital sciences and other technical fields). It is important to note that the participants of this study were mostly from the department of sciences and humanities at NU (Figure 4). Indeed, it is true that there are less women in technical departments and professions and their representation in STEM as well as in this research is not enough. There are also not enough perspectives of women from the technical majors, and they may have extremely different experiences. Such experiences are represented only by 1 woman in this study. The experiences of this woman differed from other participants extremely - she did not generally support the view that classrooms are safe or encouraging to reveal one's feminist identity due to the fact such topics are not discussed on the courses of her department and because of the peers, who are not supportive of feminists and feminism.

Section 6: Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that there is a difference between how feminists reveal and conceal their feminist identity in different social contexts. Women who identify as feminists undergo complex processes when deciding where, to whom, to what extent, and when to reveal their feminist identity. These processes are influenced by a number of factors depending on the social context in which a feminist decides whether to conceal or reveal her feminist identity. The factors may greatly vary and include broader social and cultural background of the country, social contingent and discourse, potential reaction to feminist identity expression, safety concerns, the level of comfort, and confidence of a feminist.

Through understanding of how feminist identity is expressed and met in Kazakhstan, it is possible to gain insights into how the society is in general and how complex social patterns influence and shape expression of feminist identity. This understanding can assist in promotion of a more inclusive and less discriminating social context in which feminists will feel safer and more supported. As a result of this study, it is also evident that education and access to information play a vital role in a society's acceptance of feminism and feminists. This study

revealed that feminists feel evidently and markedly safer expressing their feminist identity at Nazarbayev University rather than at home or with generally unfamiliar or vaguely familiar people. Many participants have shared that this is because the students at NU have greater access to educational content and more exposure to courses/discussions related to feminism. This indicates that there is a need to promote informational education related to feminism in order to create a safer society which will be more accepting of feminism and feminists in the future.

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Section 8: Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Materials

- *Interview Questions*

*Interviews contained open-ended questions and were semi-structured, so some questions were skipped and some questions off the list were asked during the interviews sometimes.

English:

1. What is feminism for you? Did it affect your life in any way? What role does it play in your life now?
2. How did you become a feminist? Why? Which factors affected it? How? Do you consider yourself a part of any specific group of feminists? Why? Do you disapprove of any of the groups? If yes, why?
3. How do you practice feminism in your life? Do you actively participate in feminist communities / events / discussions? Do you consume content related to feminism? For example, do you follow feminist media outlets or content creators online, read books / journals / forums on feminism? Or do you, perhaps, create such content yourself? Do you have any other examples of how you express your support for feminism?
4. Do you openly speak up about your feminist identity in new or unfamiliar social situations? Would you feel comfortable revealing your feminist identity to a stranger or a person whom you know very little? Do you have any examples from your life?
5. Do you openly speak up about your feminist identity at home? Do your parents and siblings know that you support feminism? Do other relatives know that you support feminism? Do you have a story from when you revealed your feminist identity to a family member? How did they react? If they do not know, why?
6. Do you openly speak up about your feminist identity at NU? Do your classmates or university acquaintances know that you are a feminist? If you were in a class and there was a discussion on feminism, would you join that discussion? Why or why not?
7. Out of the 3 contexts we have just discussed (new and unfamiliar social contexts, when with family and relatives, NU) which one would you name as the safest environment to reveal your feminist identity? Why? Which one is the least safe? Why?
8. Have you ever felt the need to conceal your feminist identity? Why? Could you give an example of such a situation? How did it make you feel? What circumstances might potentially make you want to hide your feminist identity?

Russian:

1. Что для тебя феминизм? Повлиял ли феминизм как-то на твою жизнь? Какую роль феминизм играет в твоей жизни?
2. Как ты стала феминисткой? Почему? Какие факторы повлияли на это? Как? Относишь ли ты себя к определенной группе феминисток? Почему? Не одобряешь ли ты какую-либо группу феминисток? Если да, почему?
3. Как ты практикуешь феминизм в своей жизни? Участвуешь ли ты активно в феминистских комьюнити / мероприятиях / обсуждениях? Потребляешь ли ты контент, связанный с феминизмом? Например, подписана ли ты на какие-то феминистские новостные порталы или фем блогеров, или читаешь книги / журналы / форумы о феминизме? Или, возможно, ты сама создаешь такой контент? Есть ли у тебя какие-то другие примеры того, как ты выражаешь свою поддержку феминизма?
4. Говоришь ли ты открыто о том, что ты феминистка в новых или незнакомых социальных ситуациях? Тебе было бы комфортно рассказать о том, что ты феминистка незнакомому или малознакомому человеку? Есть ли у тебя примеры таких ситуаций из твоей жизни?
5. Говоришь ли ты открыто о том, что ты феминистка дома? Знают ли твои родители и/или братья/сестры о том, что ты поддерживаешь феминизм? Знают ли другие родственники о том, что ты поддерживаешь феминизм? Есть ли у тебя история о том, как ты рассказала кому-то из семьи о том, что ты феминистка? Как они отреагировали? Если никто из семьи не знает, почему?
6. Говоришь ли ты открыто о том, что ты феминистка в НУ? Знают ли твои однокурсники или знакомые из университета о том, что ты поддерживаешь феминизм? Если бы на лекции обсуждали феминизм, присоединилась бы ты к этому обсуждению? Почему?
7. Из 3 контекстов, которые мы сейчас обсуждали (незнакомые социальные ситуации, с семьей и родственниками, в НУ), какой бы ты могла назвать самым безопасным для того, чтобы поделиться тем, что ты феминистка? Почему? Какой из них наименее безопасный? Почему?
8. Чувствовала ли ты когда-нибудь, что тебе нужно скрыть тот факт, что ты феминистка? Почему? Можешь привести пример такой ситуации? Как ты себя тогда чувствовала? Какие обстоятельства потенциально могли бы заставить тебя захотеть скрыть то, что ты феминистка?

- ***Oral Informed Consent Script***

Introduction. Hello! My name is Rebekka Armsan, I am the researcher of this project. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “*How Female University Students in Kazakhstan Express Their Feminist Identity in Different Social Contexts*”. This project will examine the experiences that young women who study at Nazarbayev University (NU) and identify as feminists encountered in different social contexts, what they link their experiences to and what specific situations they have been in because of their feminist identities.

Procedures. You will participate in a qualitative interview that will ask you a few demographic questions about yourself, and then some open-ended questions that will allow you to articulate your own experiences with showing or hiding your feminist identity. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete, but if you want to, you are welcome to extend our chat or to schedule a second meeting to talk more about this or stop the interview earlier and skip any questions.

Risks. The main risk of participating in this study is that some of our discussions might bring up some uncomfortable or upsetting memories or thoughts. If this happens, you are free to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. There is also a common qualitative research risk that your personal information might be identified. To prevent that, your interviews will be marked with a unique identifier, stored separately from your name. Interview data (audio files) and transcriptions will be stored securely in a Google drive for the research team only.

Benefits. You may personally find it therapeutic to discuss your own experiences, to have it recognized by research and be included as a description of a group that you generally relate to.

Compensation. No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study and will be sent to you via email if you provide your contact information.

Confidentiality & Privacy. Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by the law. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but unfortunately, total confidentiality can never be guaranteed. As described above, your interviews will be marked with a unique identifier, separate from your name. Interview data (audio files) and transcriptions will be stored securely in a Google drive for the research team, which only they will be able to access. Data will be stored until all the results have been published. In publications, you will be given a pseudonym (fake name). You can choose this yourself, or one will be chosen for you. Data from different participants may also be combined into a composite (a combination of more than one participants’ stories), so that you cannot be reidentified if you happen to tell us a particularly unique story.

Voluntary Nature of the Study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if agreement to participation is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without any repercussions. However, if your

data has been already used in something that has been published, it will not be possible to withdraw it from that publication.

Points of Contact. It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research related injury is received, the Principal Investigator, *Rebekka Armsan*, +77054447754, *rebekka.armsan@nu.edu.kz* should be contacted. Any other questions or concerns may be addressed to the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, *resethics@nu.edu.kz*.

Consent. Is everything clear for you? Do you agree to participate in this study?

Appendix B. Interview Results

**This is not a quantitative study, although it is important to provide a full picture of the qualitative data without overgeneralizing or not generalizing enough. Thus, the researcher chose to include the tables with specific categories of participants' responses in numbers.*

Figure 1. Which social context is the safest / the least safe to reveal feminist identity?

	new and unfamiliar social context	Familial social context	NU social context
The safest	1	5	7
The least safe	10	3	0
n=13			

Figure 2. Revealing or concealing feminist identity in different social contexts

	new and unfamiliar social context	Familial social context	NU social context
Reveal	8	8	12
Conceal	5	5	1
n=13			

Figure 3. Reactions to feminist identity expression in different social contexts

	new and unfamiliar social context	Familial social context	NU social context
Understanding/tolerance	1	5	12
Anti-feminist arguments	9	6	2
Aggression	9	2	0
Taunting	5	3	0
Misunderstanding / misconception of feminism	12	11	2
This affected the desire to	8	8	2

reveal feminist identity - yes			
n=13			

Figure 4. Academic background of the participants.

Major:	sociology	PSIR	economics	history	anthropology	WLL	physics
SSH*	4	4	1	1	1	1	-
SEDS*	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
n=13							

*SSH = school of sciences and humanities

*SEDS = school of engineering and digital sciences

Figure 5. Potential circumstances to reveal or conceal feminist identity

Conceal		Reveal	
Marked anti-feminist position	9	Help women/girls	9
Potential reprimand	7	With like-minded people	7
Emotional distress	6	Because it is important to discuss	7
Threat of physical violence	6	To call out discriminating views	7
Around men / older / religious people	6	-	-
No circumstances	2	-	-